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WHITMAN AND THE PRESIDENCY

NATHAN FARIES

NEAR THE BEGINNING of *Whitman the Political Poet* (1989), Betsy Erkkila made the following—then radical—claim: “political passion and struggle . . . were at the very foundation of Whitman’s democratic songs.”¹ *Leaves of Grass* is very much a political document, and the continuing work on the politics of Whitman’s poetry by Erkkila, Kerry Larson, Bryan Garman and others confirms “the political Whitman” to be a fruitful area of research that is still not exhausted.² *Leaves of Grass* grew out of soil fertile with the politics of national expansionism, with the issues of slavery and the efficacy of the Union, and Whitman demonstrates in *Leaves* and in other writings that he was fascinated by United States presidents, the men who often decided or failed to decide these great matters of the day. Whitman’s greatest poetry could not have existed without the political turmoil and, as he saw them, the wretched presidencies of the 1850s. In later life, as Whitman’s interest in politics and ire against presidents waned, so did his ability to write the kind of work that could please himself and the critics of the century to come. The career of the poet and the poet’s sense of the presidency are inseparable phenomena.

It is not difficult to find references in the prose or poetry of Whitman to nearly every president he could have been aware of, from George Washington to Benjamin Harrison. These comments have all been recorded and often cited,³ but the full impact of the presidency on *Leaves of Grass*, and Whitman’s overall conception of the presidential office are points that have not been fully elaborated. The poet who spoke familiarly of several U.S. presidents is sometimes called naïve in his appraisal of them. Mark Neely, Jr., for example, tells us that “Whitman got Lincoln all wrong by imposing on him the poet’s own misty nationalism.”⁴ Even in his lifetime Whitman’s friends were consistently exasperated by the poet’s habit late in life of speaking kindly of presidents like Grant and Hayes even in the midst of scandals that reached to the White House.⁵ Whitman no doubt often ignored the realities of political Washington, relying too optimistically on the power of the poet and of the common man, but he did have clear ideas about what the president should be. “I like to know all about the Presidents,” he once said; “They stand for a good deal, to my thinking.”⁶ I hope here to locate the place of the presi-

dent in Whitman's democratic and poetic theories, and I will begin by describing the general outline of Whitman's serious, though shifting, perspectives on the presidency. After reviewing the causes of Whitman's disenchantment and re-enchantment with the American president with a focus on Lincoln as "Redeemer President," I will examine Whitman's personalist and paradoxical theory of the place of presidential power in American democracy.

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Three prose statements vividly display Whitman's wildly fluctuating appraisal of the highest political office in the U.S. The first is an 1847 editorial from the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*. A Whig polemic had impugned President James Polk's prosecution of the war with Mexico and had even contended that Polk was cynically indifferent to the fate of his own general, Zachary Taylor. Whitman rises to the president's defense with this indignant reply:

The black mouthed libeler [sic]! He who could utter such an imputation against the President of the United States is unworthy the name of American! . . . It means that Mr. Polk, the man entrusted with the rule and responsibility of these weighty movements, is not only heedless to his great duties, *but that he wishes the Mexicans to defeat our armies and slaughter our fellow citizens, and, if possible cut down the high glory of our arms*—for what? . . . Said we too hastily that the man who could utter such charges against the *Commander-in-Chief*, deserves not the name of American? What he *does* deserve, we will not put in our columns; for the words it would require could not fail to go as far beyond the limits of decorum, as the act which invites our remarks is beyond all patriotism, decency, and common truth!⁷

Whitman, not yet thirty years of age, here defends not only President James Polk, but the presidency under Polk.

Eight years later, under a different and, to his way of thinking, far inferior presidential administration, we find Whitman a changed man as well. Here is the new Whitman, the Whitman of 1856, the year in which he wrote his own fierce polemic, a tirade entitled "The Eighteenth Presidency!" In this passage, Whitman refers specifically to the predecessors of the soon-to-be elected James Buchanan (i.e., Millard Fillmore [1850-1853] and Franklin Pierce [1853-1857]); he hoped that his words, which finally were not published during his lifetime, would help raise someone other than Buchanan to the office of president:

History is to record these two Presidencies as so far our topmost warning and shame. Never were publicly displayed more deformed, mediocre, sniveling, unreliable, false-hearted men! . . . The President eats dirt and excrement for his daily meals, likes it, and tries to force it on The States. The cushions of the Presidency are nothing but filth and blood.⁸

Whitman's own 1847 policy regarding how one is allowed to talk about the "*Commander-in-Chief*" has clearly relaxed somewhat, and his previous concern with "the limits of decorum" has been similarly modified. This is the amiable Whitman of the mid-1850s, one year after he published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*; this is a man, now the self-proclaimed democratic poet, who is decidedly not at a loss for indecorous words to describe the president of the United States.

Thirty years later, in 1888, after the Civil War, after Lincoln's rise to power and his assassination, after Whitman's own years of declining health and poetic output, and just four years before his death, we find a very different Whitman again. This is a mellower soul whose views of the presidency contain neither the flag-waving righteous indignation of the 1840s defender of the nation's leader nor the revolutionary firebreathing of the 1850s disparager of the dogs run amuck in the capital. This kinder, gentler Whitman explicitly refers to all U.S. presidents that have ever been, and incredibly all the sins of the 1850s are forgiven, the excrement and blood washed away. Whitman states plainly, "I never knew a President to totally fail. . . . In all the line of Presidents I do not think we have had one absolute failure—I think every President so far has made more or less honest use of the office."⁹ By the end of his life, he had become confident that the presidency was a necessary component of the nation's democracy: "the President is the one man representing every inch of the Republic. He's worth keeping if only as a figure-head of our national democracy, the solidarity of the nation" (Morse 369).

This pendulum swing in the political thought of Whitman and the role of Lincoln, the "Redeemer President," in the return swing have long been recognized and often discussed. The suddenness and completeness of the poet's conversion, however, and the effect of that conversion on the tone of his poetry deserves to be emphasized more than it has been up to this point. A careful study of president-references in *Leaves of Grass* reveals a remarkable and precipitous shift in Whitman's poetic treatment of the presidency after Lincoln is inaugurated and the Civil War begins, a shift that matches the whiplash effect of the three prose passages above.

There are more than thirty references to the president in general or to a specific president in the 1891-1892 "deathbed edition" of *Leaves*. Most of these references consist of the poet of democracy reminding his readers that there is no aristocracy in the United States. To make this point clear, Whitman will mention the president in the midst of a catalogue (as in "A Song for Occupations" or "A Song of Prudence") of more common occupations to register his place as among, not above, the people. In other passages with this same leveling intent, the presi-

dent is picked out of the crowd to be taught a special lesson in democracy, as in this passage from "Song of Myself" (LG 49): "Have you outstript the rest? Are you the President? / It is a trifle, they will more than arrive there every one, and still pass on." Among the remainder of the presidential references, in a few the president is roundly cursed in the manner of "The Eighteenth Presidency!" above (see "To a President" and "To the States, To Identify the 16th, 17th, or 18th Presidentiad"), and in some poems the president is eulogized (see all the Lincoln poems as well as "What Best I See in Thee" and "The Sobbing of the Bells").

The former poems, the presidential excoriations, were naturally all written in the 1850s, a couple as late as 1860; they were all written, that is, during the tenures of Whitman's least favorite presidents. The hymns of presidential praise all belong to the Lincoln era and after. The only surprise in this is that, in addition to the odes to Lincoln, Whitman would so enthusiastically support in verse certain post-Lincoln presidents like Grant and Garfield, hardly among the nation's greatest chief executives. This is normally explained by alternate appeals to Whitman's political disillusionment or apathy in later life and to the positive influence of Lincoln's leadership, which led to Whitman's renewed faith in democratic processes (Erkkila, *Political Poet* 283; Reynolds 560-561). Both explanations are convincing and doubtless relevant to the question, despite some slight contradiction between the two.

Lincoln's restoration of the full glory of the presidency for Whitman is reflected in the striking contentment of the third prose passage above regarding the fundamental goodness of all American presidents, but equally striking is the fact that all the democratic catalogues that include the president, all the scolding reminders of presidential mortality, all the mild but unflattering comparisons between the president and the common people, all these poems carry the same early dates as the virulently anti-president poems; all were written in 1860 or before. With the start of the Civil War and the ascension of Abraham Lincoln, that is to say, Whitman not only stopped cursing the president, but he ceased to say anything even moderately disrespectful about anyone who held that office. From Lincoln's incumbency until Whitman's death—for more than thirty years, that is, close to half his life—the poet almost never said another discouraging word about a president or the presidency in prose or poetry, even in the midst of the impeachment trial of Andrew Johnson and the scandal-ridden presidency of Ulysses S. Grant.¹⁰

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From his earliest days, Whitman's thinking about the president is characterized by a focus on the person of the president rather than the

president as a political entity. The power of the president for Whitman inhered in his character as an American rather than in his constitutionally delineated powers. This personalist concept of presidential power never changed for Whitman, and at the core of this concept of presidential power, as at the core of Whitman's concept of poetic power, is a paradox, a tension between the representative man as leader of the people and as a man of the people. This paradox, for Whitman, is not insoluble. Whitman's opinion of the president is inseparable from his own development as a poet. As the presidency fails, Whitman's poet rises as a substitute; as Lincoln ascends, the poet allows himself to be eclipsed.

Whitman was born in 1819, just ten years after President Thomas Jefferson left office, and he learned the values of Jeffersonian Democracy at his father's knee. The Democratic party of Jefferson, and later Jackson, was the party that reflected and shaped a populist, agrarian, small-government strain of American polity. This was the party that preached the gospel of maximized personal liberty while at the same time supporting education that would ensure that liberty was properly practiced; the party's classical liberalism was reflected also in the party's expansionist foreign policy, as in the war with Mexico under Polk. The Whigs, by contrast, a party that arose in opposition to Andrew Jackson in the 1830s, often had to campaign against an aristocratic stereotype and tended to be more protectionist and isolationist. It is not hard to see which party the young Whitman admired. Whitman grew up idolizing the legendary presidents—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Andrew Jackson—and as a young man in the 1830s and 1840s he actively supported the presidential bids of Democrats Martin Van Buren and James Polk.

Not immune to hero worship, Whitman yet had cause from his earliest days to cling to the idea of president as equal. Whitman grew to manhood during the populist presidency of one of his heroes, Andrew Jackson (1829-1837). This was the age of this "uncivilized" president's wild inauguration parties at the White House, his "fried pork and bean suppers" and his "hours of handshaking more tiring than being dragged through forty knotholes."¹¹ This is the kind of president of the people that Walter Whitman, the poet's father, admired, and he passed that love on to his son. Walter would name three of Walt's brothers after the three great American presidents and heroes of the past and present; Walt grew up alongside George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Andrew Jackson Whitman.¹² The idol-worship of his father's gesture blends with a metaphor of president-as-brother in this early Whitman sketch:

What would you say, dear reader, were I to claim the nearest relationship to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson? Yet such is the case, as I aver

upon my word. Several times has the immortal Washington sat on my shoulders, his legs dangling down upon my breast, while I trotted for sport down a lane or over the fields. Around the waist of the sagacious Jefferson have I circled one arm, while the fingers of the other have pointed him out words to spell. And though Jackson is (strange paradox!) considerably older than the other two, many a race and tumble have I had with him—and at this moment I question whether, in a wrestle, he would not get the better of me, and put me flat.¹³

This description of the brothers is tinged with both intimate affection and distanced awe for the presidents behind the names. The story is founded on a close sentimental adoration of the former presidents as much as of his brothers, but the conceit takes for granted the presidents' elevated positions in the national memory.

In this passage, then, we have one of our first glimpses into the "strange paradox" of Whitman's dichotomous vision of the presidency. On the one hand, adjectives like "immortal" and "sagacious" show that Whitman has internalized the common public perception of these men as modern-day legends. Whitman treats these three presidents elsewhere as, in Joseph Jay Rubin's words, "a trinity of national saints," describing Washington in one poem as having a "God-like calmness."¹⁴ His brief youthful personal encounters with the real Jackson and the Marquis de Lafayette show that the Democratic Whitman tended toward hero-worship as a child. This desire to beatify famous men would carry forward and reappear in Whitman's adult life. His description of his first sight of Abraham Lincoln smacks of hagiography as Lincoln, en route to his first inauguration, stares down, with supernaturally unflappable reserve, a sullen and ominously silent New York City crowd that Whitman pictures as a murderous mob with assassins' knives hidden in many a pocket.¹⁵ On the other hand, in this early narrative about his presidential brothers we can also see Whitman playfully fix on the idea of the presidents as familiar creatures, as siblings. Jerome Loving rightly points out that Whitman passes over his opportunity to build the allegory into a grand theme, to raise himself up to the podium of "representative of America." Whitman is content rather to maintain the story of his presidential brothers at a level of "hackneyed sentimentality."¹⁶ Despite the fact that, as Loving says, this may be a weakness in the story from a narrative point of view, Whitman is content for the moment to keep the presidents, and himself, at a familiar level and not yet raise them to heroic status. We will see this sort of dethroning of the first president again in the 1855 poem eventually called "The Sleepers," in which Washington comes down off his pedestal as General and hero and becomes just one of the men, a brother in arms, as he says farewell to his soldiers (*LG* 424-433).

Whitman was capable of loving the presidents with that excess of fervor that could be a kind of idolatry, but most of his prose descrip-

tions of the later presidents, when not simply hostile (an attitude reserved for three presidents only), are more like the familial and playful reading of the early sketch quoted above, demonstrating a relative lack of awe or even proper respect, and yet revealing at the same time so much liberal brotherly affection that it would be difficult for any to take offense. Though they never spoke, Whitman talked of exchanging "very cordial" bows of acquaintance with Lincoln whenever they would meet on the street, which was for a time almost daily (*PW* 2:734). Whitman loved to tell the story of President James Garfield who would habitually salute the poet on the street in Whitman's later years with a shouted phrase from the poem "Song of the Exposition": "After all not to create only!" (Traubel, 1:324). Whitman also tells the following story about President Grant as being similarly accessible and populist:

I was still in Washington while Grant was President. I saw a good deal of him about the city. He went quite freely everywhere alone. I remember one spot in particular where I often crossed him—a little cottage on the outskirts of Washington: he was frequently there—going there often. I learned that an old couple of whom he was very fond lived there. He had met them in Virginia—they received him in a plain democratic way: I would see him leaning on their window sills outside: all would be talking together: they seeming to treat him without deference for place—with dignity, courtesy, appreciation. (Traubel 1:257-258)

Whitman might just as well be talking about his own visits to the Stafford family around the same time.¹⁷ There is always in these passages of familiarity with presidents a dual strain of presidential description and self-description, a sense that the president is condescending to be among the people where he belongs but also that Whitman is raised up to a special level, the same as the president: "Around the waist of the sagacious Jefferson have I circled one arm."

Almost everything, in fact, there is to say about Whitman's president can be said for Whitman's poet as well. Growing in Whitman's mind from the days of his early prose through the crises of the 1850s was an idea of the poet's identification with the president. We can see this idea germinating in those passages from and about his youth. By the time Whitman was ready to write his major work, the American political scene and the quality of the occupant of the White House had changed to such an extent that the poet now would not only need to identify with the president, but replace him. "Their Presidents shall not be their [these State's] common referee so much as their poets shall," Whitman would write in the Preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (*LG* 712).

The disappointment with the presidents of the 1850s, then, can be summed up as a failure of identification that marks the rise of the poet over the president in Whitman's cosmology. Whitman felt it impossible

to imagine Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan as his own equals, as brothers around whom he could circle his arm. David Reynolds helpfully makes the connection between the perceived enfeeblement of the government in the 1850s and the "new vistas of self-empowerment" that opened up for the poet Whitman: "As authority figures collapsed, suddenly the individual self—sovereign, rich, complex—stood forth amid the ruin of the parties" (Reynolds 112). Since the president could not unify the country, the United States "most need poets" (LG 712).

Reynolds was the first to detail the connections "between Whitman and the crisis of the fifties" (Reynolds 602); I want here to add to his work an explicit connection between poet and president. Whitman's concept of the poet was shaped in the 1850s, and the shape that emerged was very like that of his idealized president: the poet as leader of the nation. Again from the 1855 Preface: "Other states indicate themselves in their deputies . . . but the genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures [. . .], but always most in the common people [. . .] the President's taking off his hat to them not they to him" (LG 710). The Preface goes on for pages describing the poet as the ultimate incarnation of "the common people": "Of all mankind the great poet is the equable man" (LG 712). The job of the new poet, like the job of the president, is not precisely to lead the people, but to *be* the people, to represent them full and entire: "Their Presidents shall not be their common referee so much as their poets shall" (LG 712). Once the presidents of the 1850s leave the stage and Lincoln enters, however, the president and poet will be identified more closely once again. Whitman's concept of the poet emerged out of necessity, to fill a perceived vacuum in national leadership; his formidable national poet perhaps could not have been formed in the presence of stronger political leadership.

What precisely constituted "strong leadership" for Whitman, and how did Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan fail to measure up to the ideal? First and most central to any discussion of Whitman's priorities, the president must be the unifier of the nation. Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan "eroded [Whitman's] confidence in the executive office" with their "soft-spined compromises on the slavery issue," says Reynolds (112). Fillmore's support of fugitive slave legislation, Pierce's inability to handle the Kansas-Nebraska controversy of 1854, and Buchanan's constant waffling on the expansion of slavery and apparent support for the Dred Scott decision in 1857 meant that these men were not equipped to deal with the single greatest issue of the day. The slavery issue threatened to divide the nation, and Whitman, as much as Lincoln would be, was adamant that this division could never take place. What Whitman perceives and cannot bear, what leads him as poet to write extensively on the subject of American unity in the 1850s, is a presidency that is leading the nation to the brink of divorce: "Their cherished secret scheme

is to dissolve the union of These States" (*NUPM* 6:2122). Granted, with these words from "The Eighteenth Presidency!" he is referring generally to the holders of government office and not exclusively to presidents, but his particular concern with the highest office holder in the land is evidenced in his next words: "Is nothing but breed upon breed like these to be represented in the Presidency?" (*NUPM* 6:2122). Whitman wants a president that can unify the nation, and he does not believe compromise could be the unifying force. In the absence of such a president, the poet will have to take up the slack.

In such a rarified and perilous political atmosphere, Whitman's president must naturally be decisive and independent, and the three "deformed, mediocre, sniveling, unreliable, false-hearted men" who held the office for almost the entire decade were clearly not that. Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan were too political, too calculating for Whitman, too much "in the Beltway" in our contemporary parlance. They are party puppets and compromisers, rather than fierce individuals. This is the problem that led Whitman the poet increasingly away from party politics, into Democratic splinter groups and finally to the abandonment of anything like party-line voting. Whitman wants the president not only to support democratic individual liberties, but to embody independence and strength of character in his own person. This fits very clearly with our image of Whitman himself, obsessed with "manliness." The descriptions of these weak presidents quoted above—"deformed, mediocre, sniveling, unreliable, false-hearted"—pointedly refer to both physical and spiritual incapacities. These two sorts of deformities were undeniably connected in Whitman's mind—consider the poet's interest in phrenology—and might refer specifically if cruelly to the presidential candidate of 1856, James Buchanan, who was self-conscious about an eye defect, his scarred neck, and ungainly imbalance between the weight of his body and the smallness of his feet. Whitman wants a president he can admire physically, a president with the body and looks of a laboring man, indicating the presence of a corresponding manly spirit.

What Whitman wanted (and as poet tried to offer a substitute for) in Washington was a "bold, muscular, young, well-informed, well-beloved, resolute American man, bound to do a man's duty, aloof from all parties, and with a manly scorn of all parties" (*NUPM* 6:2122). What Whitman wants, and eventually gets, is Abraham Lincoln, his "mighty Westerner," as he puts it in *November Boughs*, the two words combining physical power, frontier independence, and messianic expectation (*PW* 2:601). Though Whitman did not know much about Abraham Lincoln in 1856 when he wrote "The Eighteenth Presidency!" it is from this essay that we draw the phrase "Redeemer President" that is so often and appropriately applied to Lincoln. With the advent of Lincoln's presidency, the world changed for Whitman. We see this change not only in

the poetry of *Leaves of Grass* as described above, but also in the absence of the 1855 Preface to that work (the preface that so elevated the poet over the "executive") in subsequent editions of the work. Loving provides some possible explanations for Whitman's excision (Loving 212), but the presence of later editions of Whitman's prose that contain the Preface minus the references to the president suggests that, at least after 1860, an excised or expurgated Preface was part of Whitman's effort to revisit and revise his public portrayal of the presidency (PW 2:436, 743). Admittedly this seems a halfhearted effort, since it did not lead the poet to cut all the anti-presidential poems of the 1850s, but the Preface arguably cries out more than the poetry to be revised to match the poet's current political views; it would naturally tend to be read as a statement of present belief while the poems are more easily historicized, particularly in later editions. Despite remarkable consistency in his later public views on the presidency, Whitman admirably allowed for contradictions to remain in his greatest work, allowing *Leaves* to record the process of Whitman's thinking across four decades.

The change in the White House is not the only explanation for Whitman's whiplash shift in rhetoric. Additional contributing factors that have been discussed by others and should be mentioned here include the following: a growing conservatism and lack of revolutionary zeal that often accompany passage into middle-age and later life; a decline in physical health that, by his own admission, began to affect his work even as early as 1860 (PW 2:736); his involvement in a series of political clerkships in Washington, D.C., that gave him a more sympathetic insider's view of as well as a personal stake (David S. Reynolds, and indeed Whitman himself, stop just short of describing it as complicity) in what he previously considered the corrupt machinery of the capital (Reynolds 433); and his growing faith in a kind of optimistic Hegelian-Darwinism,¹⁸ a belief that powerful forces may collide, but that the foundations of America are fundamentally secure and the country may be shaken but will move ahead and flourish, will evolve toward an ideal form. But all these other factors cannot be divorced from the refining fire of Whitman's idealized Civil War and the crucifixion of the Union's savior, Lincoln. These are clearly the primary factors that cemented Whitman's newfound optimism and redeemed the presidency for the last thirty years of Whitman's life.

Reynolds has written at length about the redemptive interpretation of the Civil War and Lincoln's presidency in his biography of Whitman (Reynolds 414-26). As a supplement to his work, I would add here a few words of commentary on a line from Whitman's prose. The passage is originally from "The Eighteenth Presidency!," which was written before Lincoln was president. The passage is, however, directly applicable to Whitman's newfound enchantment with the presidency because

Whitman quotes the words himself in the 1870s, twenty years after they were written, in an excerpt and gloss eventually collected in "Notes Left Over":

In the talk (which I welcome) about the need of men of training, thoroughly school'd and experienced men, for statesmen, I would present the following as an offset. It was written by me twenty years ago—and has been curiously verified since:

I say no body of men are fit to make Presidents, Judges, and Generals, unless they themselves supply the best specimens of the same; and that supplying one or two such specimens illuminates the whole body for a thousand years. (*PW* 2:534-535, 760)

From this retrospective point of view, Whitman has become John the Baptist to Lincoln's Christ as he describes, five years before he would lay eyes on the man, the "heroic, shrewd, fully-inform'd healthy-bodied, middle-aged, beard-faced American blacksmith or boatman come down from the West across the Alleghanies [sic], and walk[ing] into the Presidency, dress'd in a clean suit of working attire, and with the tan all over his face, breast, and arms." What strikes the reader is that this passage includes a sense of the optimism and long-term redemptive possibilities created by such a predicted president. Whitman speaks of the rarity of the appearance of such persons and begins the excerpt, right after he introduces the passage as having been "curiously verified," with the words, "I say no body of men are fit to make Presidents, Judges, and Generals, unless they themselves supply the best specimens of the same; and that supplying one or two such specimens illuminates the whole body for a thousand years." Whitman is not only claiming to have predicted the coming of this Redeemer President, but also is claiming to have prophesied the commencement of a millennial human and presidential eschaton in which one powerful president can institute a reign of virtue that cannot easily be undermined. After the Civil War, that is to say, Whitman does not only have an increased political stake in defending the presidency, but also a philosophical and pseudo-religious stake in the question.¹⁹

This is not to say that Whitman spent the rest of his days in complete political disengagement or bleary-eyed apathetic bliss at having seen America's savior, but the poet's transformation is nonetheless remarkable. Horace Traubel records that, far from being apathetic about politics, Whitman engaged in heated political conversations with him even during the final years of his life, but Bryan Garman characterizes the normal dynamics of these discussions as the relatively conservative poet striving to moderate the radicalism of his Socialist disciple: "Be radical—be radical—be not too damned radical" (Garman 91). And some of the poet's statements from late in life attest to a general loss of political enthusiasm and generalized contentment with the presidential status quo: "I can't 'enthuse' at all," he said of the 1884 presidential

election.²⁰ Despite this apathy and despite the impressively consistent positive tone in his public poetic statements about the presidency after Lincoln, in private conversations Whitman could still fulminate against individual presidents. The last president of Whitman's lifetime, Benjamin Harrison, prompted the poet in his conversations with Horace Traubel to gear up his 1850s rhetoric once again, calling Harrison "the scalawag who was and is" and even cursing him as "the shit-ass! God damn 'im." For Whitman, Harrison was "the smallest potato in the heap . . . the most insignificant—perhaps the only really insignificant man—in the long line of our Presidents." Such comments never made it into Whitman's published writings, however, and even here we should notice how Harrison was, in Whitman's mind, somewhat saved by the now sanctified office he held: "Let me predict this—that as long as Harrison remains in office, the aura of the Presidency will give him prominence—be his savior—but after that—oh! what will be his oblivion—utter!"²¹

This account of Whitman's love/hate/love relationship with the presidency highlights the fundamental contradictions in Whitman's political life. If he wants a powerful president, how does this jibe with the poet's leveling and democratic tendencies? What powers does the president have in Whitman's view, and how much power? What is the president to Whitman? Reynolds and Erkkilä both write helpfully on this question of the contradictions inherent in Whitman's politics and connect Whitman's views on the presidency to that paradox. Both critics compare Whitman's tenure as a poet to the presidency of Andrew Jackson: just as there was a contradiction between Jackson the great egalitarian president and the Jackson the tyrant whom opponents dubbed "King Andrew II," so there is a tension in Whitman between the leveling instinct and the Carlylean strong-leader instinct. Whitman himself plays the role of the benevolent dictator who enforces the democratic leveling in his poetry and who also proclaims, "What I assume, you shall assume." Not unlike my claim that the poet positions himself as ersatz president during the 1850s, Reynolds and Erkkilä suggest a similar link between Whitman's president and his poet (Reynolds 49; Erkkilä, *Political Poet* 21).

Whitman clearly wants both the common-man president who comes out of the bosom of the masses and returns to that bosom, as well as the strong, independent leader who will think for himself and use his power actively and sometimes unilaterally, but this is not necessarily a serious contradiction in terms. Reynolds and others would like to reject the "totalitarian" Whitman. They imply that Whitman's "misjudgment" of the Jackson presidency might help explain his later "misjudgments" (of Grant and Johnson, for example). In this reading, Whitman's later con-

tentment with the presidents would reflect a consistent political naiveté that he maintained throughout his life.

Whitman's theory of the presidency and of the poet is more complex than this, however, and he deserves more credit than the theories above suggest. Kerry Larson is wise to remind us that it is probably we who are naïve when we set up a facile opposition between the "autocrat" and the "democrat" (53). Certainly there is an interesting tension between Lincoln as U.S. citizen, man of the people, and Lincoln as ruler of the nation who abridges human freedoms "for the good of the country." These are tensions that are inherent to our systems, political and literary, and not unique to Lincoln and Whitman. Whitman, in his admiration for Lincoln, has to admit the paradoxical uncommonness of the common-man president. As he himself aspires to literary greatness, he must daily absorb the contradiction of wanting to be among the people and embraced by them, and the perceived need to guide them. And the people of the United States of America are finally the creators of these contradictions, desiring, like Whitman, at once a strong leader and a fair representative of themselves. Americans have made Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln their most famous presidents of the pre-twentieth century period just as Whitman did, and they have made Whitman the greatest American poet just as early biographers Bucke and O'Connor did. Whatever contradictions these people embody and whatever hypocrisies they are guilty of, we are guilty of the same and must hold these tensions in balance in our own lives as well. And we are, like Whitman, looking for something beyond simple logical consistency in both our presidents and in our poets.

Whitman's democrat, whether poet or president, is certainly a kind of "autocrat," as Larson puts it, but the solution to this contradiction is the "adhesive" character of the autocracy. I take the idea from Whitman via Erkkila who has recently discussed in detail this dynamic as it appears in Whitman's poetry and beyond. Erkkila explores the "specifically homoerotic sources of Whitman's notions of adhesiveness, comradeship, and love," but argues that "Whitman envisioned adhesiveness not as a sexual relation only but as a social relation, a politics, and a metaphysics" (Erkkila, "Public Love" 117, 134). Larson similarly describes Whitman as perhaps unique in "conceiving poems to be vehicles—or better yet, the occasion—for social cohesion" (Larson xvi). As Whitman's theory of poetry goes, so goes his theory of the presidency.

Whitman's theory of presidential power is exactly as complex and contradictory as it would need to be in order to deal with the contradictory nature of the ideal president he desired, as complex and contradictory as the nation that could produce such a president and such a poet, the American nation which that president and poet would represent. Whitman's own solution to the contradictions is bound up in a question

of power: how much power and what sort of power is contained in the presidency of the United States? On the one hand, Whitman often seemed to insist that the president was practically superfluous in the American system of government, not actually in possession of any power that could do harm to the basically sound and stable democratic system perfected in the Constitution. We can see this in the several "leveling" poems in *Leaves of Grass* in which the president is listed alongside other professions traditionally considered more humble. This is also evidenced in the minimal mentions of the president or presidency in *Democratic Vistas*—the people and especially the poet get much more attention—and in the rather modest view of presidential authority expressed in "Notes Left Over": "We elect Presidents, Congressmen, &c., not so much to have them consider and decide for us, but as surest practical means of expressing the will of the majorities on mooted questions, measures, &c" (*PW* 2:531). At other times Whitman views presidents as "kings of men" with "mighty powers . . . really with more sway than any king in history, and with better capacity in using that sway" (*PW* 2:509, 535). These are monarchical descriptions of the great Lincoln and his mighty successors. We should also remember the line in one of this essay's opening quotations: Whitman called the presidency under Polk an office "entrusted with the rule and responsibility of these weighty movements" and a position of "great duties." And certainly Whitman's fulminations against the 1850s presidents result not from a belief that the chief executive has too little power but from a fear that he has too much.

Whitman has years in which he blames or credits the president as the cause of or savior from all ill, but overall he seems to hold to a non-political idea of the presidency; he seems to believe in fact that political power is not the key to the presidency. The president and the poet are for Whitman, then, those representative leaders who cause a nation to cohere, those figures who resolve the contradictions of a people and, by embodying the paradox that is America, solve the paradox. In several places in his prose, Whitman attempts to resolve the no-power/all-power paradox with this formulation: the president is little or nothing politically, but he is everything personally. The president, like the poet, is the model American, the representative man, and it is in this role that he wields his influence, clearly a horizontal "influence" more than vertical "power." The president and the poet are channels of the "adhesive love" that is the "base of all metaphysics" for Whitman (*PW* 2:414). They are the catalyst for true adhesion, true uniting, a reconciliation of the American paradox. To be the model American means to be fully God and fully man, to incarnate a peculiarly American paradox new to the political history of the world: the paradox which he describes in *Notes Left Over* as the tension between the individual and the aggregate:

Then, in the thought of nationality especially for the United States, and making them original, and different from all other countries, another point ever remains to be considered. There are two distinct principles—aye, paradoxes—at the life-fountain and life continuation of the States; one, the sacred principle of the Union, the right of ensemble, at whatever sacrifice—and yet another, an equally sacred principle, the right of each State, consider'd as a separate sovereign individual, in its own sphere. Some go zealously for one set of these rights, and some as zealously for the other set. We must have both; or rather, bred out of them, as out of mother and father, a third set, the perennial result and combination of both, and neither jeopardized. (PW 2:513-514)

Whitman in his later days is beginning to see his own and Lincoln's emergence in the context of a Hegelian paradigm of synthesis bringing resolution to thesis and antithesis.

Whitman sees this tension and this solution as existing not only in the federal/state relationship, but also within each individual citizen. The true poet embodies this paradox because of his ability to communicate this American nature and aid others in their search for enlightenment also. Whitman was, in his own eyes, "the truly representative American, authorized by time itself to read the secret signs of his times and to 'divine another's destiny better than the other can'" (Thomas 153, 152). And the president also, the ideal president, is similarly able to model both the individual and aggregate aspects of America so that he can lead the nation down the path of virtue to true self-actualization. Consider this passage from a brief essay on "Nationality," the first passage in *Notes Left Over*:

For the theory of this Republic is, not that the Central government is the fountain of all life and power, dispensing it forth, around, and to the remotest portions of our territory, but that THE PEOPLE are, represented in both, underlying both the General and State governments, and consider'd just as well in their individualities and in their separate aggregates, or States, as consider'd in one vast aggregate, the Union. This was the original dual theory and foundation of the United States, as distinguish'd from the feudal and ecclesiastical single idea of monarchies and papacies, and the divine right of kings. (Kings have been of use, hitherto, as representing the idea of the identity of the nations. But, to American democracy, *both* ideas must be fulfill'd, and in my opinion the loss of vitality of either one will indeed be the loss of vitality of the other.) (PW 2:514)

The presidency is not specifically mentioned here, but we can hear quite clearly a view of government that is not about the "single idea" of localization and disbursement of power, but the dual idea of representation. This is not a simple republican "representation" by which we elect someone to speak for us in Washington; this is *representation* in all that that word can mean, a government that reflects and embodies the dual spirit of an aggregate nation and individual *people*. By implication, especially considering the final parenthetical line about kings, the president, this new creature which is replacing and is the proper evolution of the mon-

arch, will represent not only the aggregate, the "identity of the nations," but must stand for both individual and aggregate. Here we find Whitman's justification in terms of political theory that answers those contradictions and apparent hypocrisies in Jackson and in Lincoln and in Whitman himself. As Whitman explains in his oft-repeated lecture on the "Death of Abraham Lincoln," the life and death of a great man, in America a great president, have mysterious and paradoxical individuating and unifying powers:

The final use of a heroic-eminent life—especially of a heroic-eminent death—is its indirect filtering into the nation and the race, and to give, often at many removes, but unerringly, age after age, color and fibre to the personalism of the youth and maturity of that age, and of mankind. Then there is a cement to the whole people, subtler, more underlying, than any thing in written constitution, or courts or armies—namely the cement of a death identified thoroughly with that people, at its head, and for its sake. (PW 2:508)

Erkkila's concept of adhesion is obvious here. Great individuals become "models of character" for millions of individuals as well as becoming a bond that holds those individuals together. This is what Whitman wanted in a president, and he lived to see it, like Simeon in the temple waiting to see the Christ. Whitman saw the coming of his presidential Christ in Lincoln, and, though no other president in his lifetime could live up to that standard, they all benefited from the afterglow of Lincoln's aura, and Whitman would never again express in his writings any great and abiding concern over what a president might do or fail to have done.

In 1884 Whitman wrote a loving ode to the election process called "Election Day, November, 1884." He penned several lines praising the citizens' freedom to vote. Whitman later admitted that he did not himself vote on that election day: "I always refrain—yet advise everybody else not to forget" (quoted in Loving 430). In one of the dirtiest campaigns of the century, with Democrat Grover Cleveland trying to play down revelations of his fathering an illegitimate child and Republican James Blaine fighting charges that he used the House Speakership for personal gain, a politically kinder, gentler Whitman had only good things to say about each man. He said he would have voted for Cleveland, although he did "rather like Blaine—perhaps prefer him" (Natanson 15). At last he seemed insufficiently interested in the race. On October 31st of that year, he wrote, "The political parties are trying—but mostly in vain—to get up some fervor of excitement on the pending Presidential election. It comes off next Tuesday. There is no question at issue of any importance. I cannot 'enthuse' at all. I think of the elections of 30 and 20 yrs. ago. Then there *was* something to arouse a fellow" (Natanson 15).

"Thirty years ago" was 1854, the year Whitman wrote the anti-presidential "A Boston Ballad" and two years before he wrote "The Eighteenth Presidency!" "Thirty years ago" was when Whitman was furious at presidents, skeptical of the presidency, and "aroused" to begin his greatest work. "Whitman's poetry is born out of social and political division," Mark Maslan reminds us, and his best poetry "embodies these divisions instead of claiming peremptorily to transcend them."²² By 1884, it seems Whitman felt whole, undivided, and had felt so for almost twenty years. The country had been unified, and this completeness and post-war happiness with the presidents marked the wane of his poetic powers. The political divisions of the 1850s, which gave birth to Whitman's best work, have a clear place in this early work. His post-bellum presidential contentment, which may have turned to political apathy, also shows up in his work, though it inspired more prose than poetry after the Lincoln poems.

Finally, and not surprisingly, Whitman misses those rousing, fecund days when the president ate excrement and liked it, when Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan sat on cushions of filth and the pavements of Congress ran red with blood. He misses those days and those men like he misses the birth of his own creativity; he misses Lincoln like he misses himself. When he humbly, and somewhat ludicrously, contradicts himself to say, "I think every President so far has made more or less honest use of the office," Whitman is no doubt feeling some nostalgia for the 1850s and the three men he hated so much then. Though at the end of his life he perhaps does not hate them any less and would not do anything differently could he return to those days, he seems to understand the good that finally came out of their evil, the birth of the poet and the inauguration of a president, neither of whom would likely have emerged had they not been desperately needed. Whitman seems in his last years to want to make some gesture of apology and gratitude to President Fillmore, President Pierce, and President Buchanan for playing their role in history; perhaps he knew at last how much he owed them.

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NOTES

1 Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 6.

2 The following works by those writers will be cited further below: Betsy Erkkila, "Public Love: Whitman and Political Theory," *Whitman East and West: New Contexts for Reading Walt Whitman*, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), 115-144; Kerry C. Larson, *Whitman's Drama of Consensus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Bryan K. Garman, "'Heroic Spiritual Grandfather': Whitman, Sexuality, and the American Left, 1890-1940," *American Quarterly* 52 (2000), 90-126.

3 David S. Reynolds's *Walt Whitman's America* (New York: Knopf, 1995) is, among the biographies, particularly full of information about the political Whitman and his various encounters with presidents. *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, ed. J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings (New York: Garland, 1998), contains a helpful summary of Whitman's feelings about most of the presidents, though little about his concept of the presidency generally. See Reynolds, 433; and Frederick Hatch, "Presidents, United States," *Encyclopedia*, 546-549.

4 Mark E. Neely, Jr., "Whitman and the Civil War: A Response to Helen Vendler," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 39 (2000), 33.

5 Not to mention the poet's kind words about emperors like Germany's Wilhelm I, for whom Whitman wrote "The Dead Emperor" in 1888. See Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, eds., *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition* (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 533n: "To his friends, who protested this salute, WW replied, ' . . . too many of the fellows forget that I include emperors, lords, kingdoms, as well as presidents, workmen, republics.'" See also Reynolds, 560.

6 Quoted by Sidney H. Morse, "My Summer with Walt Whitman, 1887," in Horace L. Traubel, Richard Maurice Bucke, and Thomas B. Harned, eds., *In Re Walt Whitman* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1893), 367.

7 Walt Whitman, *The Gathering of the Forces*, ed. Cleveland Rodgers and John Black (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1920), 1:257-258.

8 Walt Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 6:2123.

9 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 1 (London: Gay & Bird, 1906), 81.

10 The following is a briefly annotated list, in order of appearance in the "deathbed edition" of 1891-92, of all references to the presidency, or to specific presidents, in *Leaves of Grass*. I include the line number of the reference immediately following the title of the poem, the page number of the reference (as it appears in *LG*), the year of composition, and a brief description of Whitman's use of the president/presidency in the poem in question.

"Starting from Paumanok" (18.11) (*LG* 27) (1860). The president here emerges from among the common people, the "ploughmen" and "mechanics."

"Song of Myself" (15.45) (*LG* 43) (1855). Here the president is part of a catalogue of Americans. He is placed immediately after "the prostitute," hardly a coincidence considering Whitman's 1856 equation of presidents and prostitutes in "The Eighteenth Presidency!"

"Song of Myself" (21.10-11) (*LG* 49) (1855). "Have you outstript the rest? Are you the President? / It is a trifle, they will more than arrive there every one, and still pass on."

"The Prairie-Grass Dividing" (8) (*LG* 129) (1860). The people of the American West are glorified as heedless of artificial constraints and authority; they "look carelessly in the faces of Presidents and governors, as to say *Who are you?*"

"When I Peruse the Conquer'd Fame" (2) (*LG* 129) (1860). The lover, not the president, is the object of the poet's envy.

"Song of the Answerer" (1.34) (*LG* 168) (1855). Identification of the poet with and ascendancy of the poet over the president: "He says indifferently and alike *How are you friend?* to the President at his levee."

"Song of the Broad-Axe" (5.15) (LG 190) (1856). A vision of the great American city "Where the citizen is always the head and ideal, and President, Mayor, Governor and what not, are agents for pay."

"A Song for Occupations" (1.22) (LG 212) (1855). The president is not greater than "you."

"A Song for Occupations" (2.23) (LG 213) (1855). The poet brings "you" what "you much need yet always have." He promises some mysterious gift, something that eludes language and that cannot be found in the "President's message."

"A Song for Occupations" (4.2) (LG 215) (1855). "The President is there in the White House for you, it is not you who are here for him."

"Year of Meteors (1859-1860)" (3) (LG 238) (1865). This is the single exception among the pre-*Drum-Taps* poetry, the only poem that is not in some sense negative about the presidency. It was written about the late 1850s, as the title suggests, and so belongs before the Civil War poetry, but it was actually written in 1865. Note the very different tone from all other president-poems around it, a tone appropriate to the year in which Lincoln was elected (1860). "I would sing your contest for the 19th Presidentiad" sounds very different from Whitman's invectives about "The Eighteenth Presidency!" This poem reinforces Whitman's portrayal of himself as a prophet. He did indeed prophesy the coming of his longed-for Redeemer President, but his prophecies were much clearer in his prose than in any poetry he had written. He wrote this poem of meteors and other portents later but placed it here to provide evidence within *Leaves* that he did indeed see the age of Lincoln coming.

"A Boston Ballad" (4, 18, 34) (LG 264-266) (1854). Here begins the *By the Roadside* cluster, which we associate most strongly with the anti-presidential 1850s, as it contains the nastiest statements about the presidency to be found in Whitman's poetry. The president is here associated with an exhumed King George, a tyrant who needs to be deposed once again. This poem all but calls for armed revolution against Pierce.

"Europe, The 72d and 73d Years of These States" (LG 266-268) (1850). Previously "Resurgemus," this poem contains no direct mention of the president and is in fact mostly concerned with Europe finally being free from monarchs as America is, and so the poet appears generally happy with conditions of democracy in the U.S. The presidents Whitman would hate so bitterly were not yet on the scene in 1850 when he wrote this, so this can be read as a rare example of Whitman's pre-1850s optimism penetrating *Leaves*. However, the placement of this poem directly after "A Boston Ballad" makes the reader feel those mentions of "tyrants" and "kings" are not irrelevant to the political situation in the U.S. later in the 1850s, and with the line "Liberty, let others despair of you—I never despair of you," Whitman could easily be talking about the pressing issues of his own day in his own nation. The poem then becomes evidence of, as M. Wynn Thomas understates the point, the "deep crises of confidence in his America" with which Whitman is "periodically afflicted during the 1850s." By this reading the poem is a desperate cry, yet it contains some of that earlier and later hope that the president is not so powerful that the actions of a single man could ever spell the doom of the nation. Thomas also helpfully points out that this poem contains perhaps the only legitimate foreshadowing of Lincoln in Whitman's poetry. The poem ends with "an allusion to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, which is the classic biblical text of millenarian expectation of a redeemer figure—such as the 'Redeemer President' that Whitman prophesied in 'The Eighteenth Presidency!'" (M. Wynn Thomas, "Representatives and Revolutionists: The New Urban Politics Revealed," *Whitman East and West: New Contexts for Reading Walt Whitman*, ed. Ed Folsom [Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002], 153, 152.)

"To a President" (LG 272) (1860). Four brief lines of criticism addressed to Buchanan: "You have not learn'd of Nature."

"To the States, To Identify the 16th, 17th, or 18th Presidentiad" (LG 278-279) (1860). Whitman's parting blow at Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan before he moves on to happier visions of the presidency, this poem contains his most direct and prosaic president-bashing: "What a filthy Presidentiad!"

"The Centenarian's Story" (LG 295-299) (1865). Here we cross the line into *Drum-Taps* and the new Whitman who is far less willing to speak or write ill of the presidency. Whitman presents early American history here in a dramatic monologue of a soldier who lived it. Part of this history is the Battle of Brooklyn, and the oft-mentioned "General" is George Washington. The struggle of the Civil War as embodied in *Drum-Taps* becomes the second revolution that Whitman hoped for in "A Boston Ballad," a second birth of the nation.

Memories of President Lincoln (LG 328-339) (1865-1871). This four-poem cluster does not require additional commentary for our purposes here. We officially embark on the path of post-1860 positive presidential poetry.

"By Blue Ontario's Shore" (9.7) (LG 347) (1856). "Their Presidents shall not be their [these State's] common referee so much as their poets shall." This line is drawn directly from the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (LG 712) and therefore originates even earlier than the 1856 date attached to the poem. This is a relatively gentle slight of the president, but still a slight and therefore odd for its appearance directly after the Lincoln cluster. Because of the date of composition, its tone shares more with the earlier poems than with the later. Whitman's emphasis on the importance of the poet, as an occupation similar to and even more important than the president, did not change throughout his life, though it should be noted that statements implying the poet's and specifically his own similarity to the president increased after Lincoln, and statements implying superiority over the president all but vanished from his work.

"Song of Prudence" (19) (LG 374) (1856). "Savage, felon, President, judge, farmer, sailor, mechanic, literat, young, old, it is the same." The leveling instinct remains in this typical catalogue of persons. Again this sort of mention is exceptional among later clusters, but note the poem sounds like one of the 1850s poems because it is one.

"The Sleepers" (LG 424-433) (1855). A poetic dream vision, this poem is not particularly political on its face, but in section five there is another account of General Washington embracing his men after the Battle of Brooklyn. Written in 1855, the poem, like the General, is exceptional for its "God-like calmness" in the midst of the political turmoil that produced other less-happy poems about contemporary presidents. This poem is clearly more about Washington specifically, and memories of Whitman's childhood home in Brooklyn, than a poem about politics in the 1850s.

"To Think of Time" (3.8) (LG 435) (1855). "He that was President was buried, and he that is now President shall surely be buried." Echoes of Ecclesiastes resound in this third and final exception to the pro-presidents-poems-placed-later rule. Again, note the year of composition; it sounds like earlier presidential poetry for a reason.

"Thought" (4) (LG 453) (1860). This is the most mysterious of all of Whitman's presidential references and does not clearly fit my thesis, since it is neither generous nor unkind toward the president, not expressing an opinion at all, but rather mentioning a "murky mystery about the fate of the President." The line itself is a "murky mystery." One could argue that the mere mention of the president amongst imagery of shipwreck might indicate Whitman's feelings about the office; maybe this is a metaphor for the shipwreck that was the presidency in the 1850s. Shipwreck and "the fate of the President" may more likely be linked in Whitman's mind because Zachary Taylor, the last president to serve before Whitman's three least favorite, died of a mysterious disease in July 1850, the same month transcendentalist writer Margaret Fuller

died in a shipwreck “off the Northeast coast.”

“What Best I See in Thee: To U. S. G. return’d from his World’s Tour” (LG 485) (1881). The title says it all, a perfect example of what many saw as Whitman’s frustrating political conservatism after the Civil War.

“The Sobbing of the Bells” (LG 500) (1881). A eulogy written upon the death of President Garfield.

“Abraham Lincoln, Born Feb. 12, 1809” (LG 512) (1888). Two lines about the Redeemer President, written for the anniversary of his birth: “To-day, from each and all, a breath of prayer—a pulse of thought, / To memory of Him—to birth of Him.” Note the deity-inflected capital letters.

“Election Day, November, 1884” (LG 517) (1884). An ode to “America’s choosing day,” to the vibrant machinery of democracy.

“Death of General Grant” (LG 519) (1885). “Man of the mighty days—and equal to the days!” Fond of Grant, despite the scandals, Whitman always saw this president in close association with Lincoln and the Civil War, as another great rough man from the West, raised up by Fate for the great work of the 1860s, and equal to that work.

“Washington’s Monument, February, 1885” (LG 520) (1885). An occasional poem written for the dedication of the Washington Monument on the anniversary of the first president’s birth. Whitman glorifies “the indomitable heart and arm” of the hero-president and places him in the “never-broken line” of heroes of “Freedom,” “Toleration,” and “Law” throughout time and space.

“The Dying Veteran” (LG 529-530) (1887). The president is mentioned here, but is incidental. An old soldier, “a fighter under Washington himself,” on his death-bed longs to have the days of his “old wild battle-life” back again.

11 Joseph Jay Rubin, *The Historic Whitman* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1973), 28.

12 Though in point of fact Jackson was not president when Andrew Whitman was born, these three choices of names might all fairly be considered presidential appellations. Although Andrew was born the year before Jackson became president, since Jackson had almost won in the controversial election of 1824, Walter must certainly have felt Jackson *should* already have been president in the year of Andrew’s birth, and he must have further been hoping the name would be that of a president before the year was out.

13 Walt Whitman, *Early Poems and Fiction*, ed. Thomas L. Brasher (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 248.

14 See “The Sleepers” for the Washington description.

15 Walt Whitman, *Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 2:499-501.

16 Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 87-88.

17 Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 359-361.

18 There are several sources that describe Whitman’s thinking about Hegel. Erkkilä’s “Public Love: Whitman and Political Theory” is the most recent mention. She cites the close of *Democratic Vistas* as “a homoerotic rewriting of Hegel’s *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*”; see Erkkilä, “Public Love,” 136.

19 Loving, 354, uses this same passage to make the opposite argument, but I believe he has somehow missed the framing context into which Whitman places his self-quote. Loving claims that the 1874 reprinting of the passage in a *Daily Graphic* article demonstrates Whitman's continuing dissatisfaction with the presidency. After quoting part of the "I would be much pleased to see" section, Loving concludes, "One Lincoln was not enough." But the 1874 article (*PW* 2:758-763) also contained the opening and closing words we find in "Notes Left Over" (*PW* 2:534-535). It seems Loving inadvertently ignores the words Whitman used to introduce and conclude the passage, words which make the article not a statement of dissatisfaction with current politics, but rather a boast that the poet presaged the arrival of Lincoln and the subsequent satisfactory situation in the White House. One Lincoln was indeed enough for Whitman, enough to cover the sins of a multitude of presidents.

20 Nicholas Natanson, "Whitman's 'Election Day, November, 1884,'" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 5 (Winter 1988), 15.

21 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 5 (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1964), 65, 117, 450.

22 Mark Maslan, "Whitman and His Doubles: Division and Union in *Leaves of Grass* and Its Critics," *American Literary History* 6 (1994), 13.